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RAOUL WALLENBERG

the hero of the Holocaust

By Stewart McBride

Staff correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor
Woodside, Calif.

On a hot July afternoon in 1944, a balding Swede in the import-export business arrived in Nazi-occupied Budapest, carrying a rucksack, sleeping bag, and revolver. He told a friend he carried the revolver because he was scared. The man's name was Raoul Wallenberg. He was a shy, soft-spoken, 32-year-old scion of a banking family said to have more money than the entire Swedish government. In some circles he was called "the rich kid." Others said he was a "nice but frail boy."

The name Raoul Wallenberg has yet to become a household word. But a growing number of Americans believe that because of the six months he spent in Budapest, this "nice but frail boy" was the greatest hero of World War II. Albert Einstein is among those who championed the young Swede. Shortly after the war, he nominated Wallenberg for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Wallenberg is credited with having saved as many as 100,000 Hungarian Jews from the Nazis' extermination efforts. He worked under the aegis of the Swedish Legation in Budapest, and for his tough negotiating with the Nazis, his wholesale distribution of Swedish "protective passports," for personally pulling Jews out of the "death marches" and cattle cars en route to the gas chambers in Auschwitz, Wallenberg became known as the "hero of the Holocaust."

The Swedish hero is also a lost hero. Arrested by the Russians at the end of the war, he disappeared into the Soviet gulag. And while today the Soviet Union maintains he died in a Moscow prison in 1947, reports over the last three decades from former Soviet prisoners say Wallenberg is still alive.

The mystery has spawned Free Wallenberg Committees throughout Europe and the United States. Last summer, President Carter and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance raised the Wallenberg case with Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev and Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko. Mr. Carter reported last October:

"The Soviets maintain their claim that Mr. Wallenberg is no longer alive, but we are not forgetting about this case and will continue our efforts."

Heading the Free Wallenberg campaign out of her home in Hillsborough, Calif., is Annette Lantos. At age 13, she and

her mother escaped from Hungary with Portuguese protective passports, for which they believe Wallenberg was indirectly responsible. Mrs. Lantos's husband, Tom, now an economics professor at San Francisco State University and the leading candidate for a California congressional seat, is also a Hungarian Jew who worked on Wallenberg's staff organizing the rescue missions when he was 16.

"Neither I, my husband, nor our children would be here today if it were not for Raoul Wallenberg," says Annette Lantos at a gathering of Wallenberg supporters in Woodside, Calif. "During that whole dark period, no one else directly confronted the cruelty of the Germans. No one else had the audacity to follow the death marches, to jump in front of guns leveled at Jews, to pull people off the deportation trains. Raoul Wallenberg not only saved 100,000 lives, he saved our faith in humanity."

On Jan. 19, 1945, Wallenberg was taken into Soviet "protective custody" and escorted to Debrecen, where the Russians and provisional Hungarian government were headquartered. Presumably, the Russians suspected him of espionage.

Says Mr. Anger: "The Soviets said to themselves, 'Why would a Swedish diplomat stay on the battlefield just to help Jewish people?' When they discovered he had American money on him [by some accounts as much as \$20,000], to them it was clear he was an American spy." Some also speculate the Soviets felt threatened by Wallenberg's plan to restore Jewish property and feared he was scheming to keep post-war Hungary neutral like Sweden.

A month after Wallenberg's arrest, the Soviet Embassy in Stockholm informed Raoul's mother that her son was safe in Russia. At that time, the Swedish government cautioned Wallenberg's parents to remain silent for fear a public confrontation with the Russians might jeopardize his safety. Two years later, the Russians announced that Wallenberg "was not known in the Soviet Union," and said they suspected he had died in 1945 during fighting in Budapest.

After a series of Swedish inquiries, the Soviets retracted their 1947 statement. On Feb. 6, 1957, then-Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko announced that a search of the Lubyanka Prison archives had turned up a handwritten report dated July 17, 1947, which said that "the prisoner Wallenberg [sic] died suddenly in his cell last night."

Gromyko's announcement came shortly after former Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalin in 1957 and included the footnote that the Soviet minister responsible for Wallenberg's imprisonment had been a friend of Stalin, and had been sentenced to death and shot.

This "handwritten report," however, has been contradicted by more than a dozen alleged sightings of Wallenberg since 1947. While attending a medical conference in Moscow in January 1961, Nanna Svartz, a Swedish professor and fam-

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ily friend of the Wallenbergs, mentioned the case to a Russian colleague, Prof. A. L. Myasnikov. He replied he was familiar with the case and that the Swede was "in a bad state" in a Soviet mental institution. When the Swedish government inquired further, Myasnikov retracted his previous statement, saying Svartz must have misunderstood him.

In 1978, a former Polish citizen, Abraham Kalinski, who now lives in Israel, reported he had seen Wallenberg in a prison yard in Vladimir. Two years ago, Jan Kaplan, a Russian Jew, in a phone conversation with his daughter in Israel, told of a 1975 meeting in Butyrka Prison with a Swede who had been in prison for 30 years. Later, Kaplan attempted to smuggle out a letter detailing his encounter with the Swede. The day after he sent the letter, he was rearrested by the KGB and returned to prison. The Soviets then curtly told Sweden: "There is no, nor can there be any, new information regarding the fate of Raoul Wallenberg."

Until recently, the Swedish government had made only halfhearted attempts to get to the bottom of Wallenberg's disappearance. Sweden's postwar socialist government was afraid of stepping on Moscow's toes, and repeatedly passed over opportunities to raise the issue or exchange prisoners. Sweden turned down several offers of assistance in the case from the US.

"The Wallenbergs were the Rockefellers of Sweden, and why should a socialist government want to help them?" reasons Berenyi. "Now, with a conservative government in power, things may change."

Evidence of such a change came last fall when Sweden offered to swap for Wallenberg a Swedish national caught spying for the Russians. The Soviet Union was not interested.

Because of Sweden's silent diplomacy and longtime refusal to "drive tandem with the Americans" (as the Swedish ambassador to Moscow put it in 1949), little progress was made until two years ago. In November 1977, Tom Lantos showed his wife, Annette, an item in the back pages of the New York Times reporting that Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal had interrogated a former Russian KGB agent who said Wallenberg was alive and being held in a Siberian hospital.

"We knew we had to do something, but couldn't expect to bring proceedings against the Russian empire from our little house in Hillsborough," Mrs. Lantos says. 1978, they went to Washington. Support gathered slowly, and by July 1979, Sens. Frank Church, Claiborne Pell, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and Rudy Boschwitz announced they would co-chair the Free Wallenberg Committee (c/o PO Box 611, Burlingame, CA 94010) in the US.

"There is too much evidence to accept the pat Soviet statement that he died in 1947. It appears the Soviets want to sweep the Wallenberg case under the rug," the senators' joint statement said.

The present strategy is to keep alive the Wallenberg case until a thaw in Soviet-American relations and, perhaps, the opportunity to extract concessions from Moscow. People like Guy von Dardel believe the high-ranking Soviet officials who deny knowledge of his brother are "honestly misinformed" by lower-level bureaucrats who have conspired to cover up the case. Von Dardel adds: "We've been very careful never to get mixed up with professional anti-Soviet organizations. We always make it clear we are not trying to hurt the Soviets. We just want Raoul back." ■

EXCERPTS